

# Pope Leo XIII on True Liberty

## A Great Pontiff Condemns a Modern Error

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IN his encyclical letter *Libertas*, Pope Leo XIII warns that there are certain so-called liberties which modern society takes for granted that every man possesses as a right. These are the liberties "which the followers of liberalism so eagerly advocate and proclaim." (The terms freedom and liberty will be considered synonymous for the purposes of this article; the Latin word *libertas* is expressed by either, depending on the translator.)

The essence of liberalism is that the individual human being has the right to decide for himself the norms by which he will regulate his life. He has the right to be his own arbiter as to what is right and what is wrong; he is under no obligation to subject himself to any external authority. In the liberal sense, liberty of conscience is the right of an individual to think and believe whatever he wants, even in religion and morality: to express his views publicly and to persuade others to adopt them, using word of mouth, the public press or any other means. He has the right to choose any religion or to have no religion; this is a natural right. The only limitation to be placed upon him is that he should refrain from causing a breach of public order. Even the most extreme liberal would hardly accept that someone who believed that men with blue eyes ought to be executed should be allowed to put this belief into practice. But papal teaching distinguishes between mere public order and the common or public good. An obscene or blasphemous play might not provoke a riot, and hence would not disturb public order; but it could hardly be supposed that permitting it would promote the public good.

Pope Leo XIII teaches that "many cling so obstinately to their own opinion in this matter as to imagine these modern liberties, cankered as they are, to be the greatest glory of our age, and the very basis of civil life, without which no perfect government can be conceived." Sadly, it must be conceded that since Pope Leo wrote these words in 1888, the errors he condemned have become so generally accepted within the liberal-dominated ethos of Western society that they are considered acceptable, or even admirable, by most Catholics. It would be hard to find a bishop in the

English-speaking world today who would give wholehearted endorsement to the teaching of *Libertas*.

St. Thomas Aquinas explains:

God left man in the hand of his own counsel, not as though it were lawful for him to do whatever he will, but because, unlike irrational creatures, he is not compelled by natural necessity to do what he ought to do, but is left the free choice proceeding from his own counsel.

Similarly, Pope Leo teaches that:

While other animate creatures follow their senses, seeking good and avoiding evil only by instinct, man has reason to guide him in each and every act of his life.

The Pope shows that liberty can be exercised only by those who have the gift of reason-----i.e., Angels and men. He defines reason as 'the faculty of choosing means fitted for the end proposed; for he is master of his actions who can choose one thing out of many.'

He then explains that "freedom of choice is a property of the will, or rather it is identical with the will in so far as it has in its action the faculty of choice."

The will always chooses what it considers to be good or useful. The act of the will, the choice, is based upon a judgment made by the intellect, i.e., an act of reason. Judgment is "an act of of reason, not of the will." We frequently lack the will power to implement what our judgment tells us is the right course of action.

Freedom is exercised legitimately only when man conforms his will to that of God. He has no natural right to prefer his own counsel to that of his Creator, even though physically and psychologically he is able to do so. A crucial distinction must be made here in discussing the nature of free will. This is the distinction between being physically and psychologically *able* (free) to choose evil, and having a *natural right* to choose evil. In the language of liberalism, to say that a man is *free* to do something means that he has a right to do it, subject to the requirements of public order.

"Nothing more foolish can be uttered or conceived," teaches Pope Leo, "than the

notion that because man is free by nature, he is therefore exempt from law."

The primary law to which every man has the duty to submit is the *eternal or natural law*, the law of nature implanted in our hearts by our Creator as part of human nature. This natural law, the Pope explains, "is written and engraved in the mind of every man; and this is nothing but our reason, commanding us to do right and forbidding sin . . . The law of nature is the same thing as the *eternal law*, implanted in rational creatures, and inclining them *to their right action and end*; and can be nothing else but the eternal reason of God, the Creator and Ruler of all the world."

What applies to the individual applies no less to civil society. Those invested with the power to govern derive their authority not from the people who elected them, in the case of a democracy, but from God. Legislators have no right to enact civil laws which conflict with the natural law, even if a majority of the people wish them to do so. All authority in church, state and the family derives from God, as Our Lord pointed out to Pontius Pilate. Pope Leo condemns "the doctrine of the supremacy of the greater number, and that all right and all duty reside in the majority." Thus, the Church accepts democracy if, by this term, it is meant that those who govern are selected by a vote based on a limited or universal suffrage. The Church condemns democracy in the sense that those who govern do so not as delegates of God, but as delegates of the people who elected them; and that they are bound to legislate in accordance with the wishes of the majority. "It is not of itself wrong to prefer a democratic form of government," writes Pope Leo, "if only the Catholic doctrine be maintained as to the origin and exercise of power." Under no circumstances can any civil government have the right to permit such an abomination as abortion, which is manifestly contrary to the eternal law of God. The Pope's teaching on this point is very clear, and he adds that where a government enacts legislation contrary to the natural law we are bound not to obey it:

It is manifest that the eternal law of God is the sole standard and rule of human liberty, not only in each individual man, but also in the community and civil society which men constitute when united. Therefore, the true liberty of human society does not consist in every man doing what he please, for this would simply end in turmoil and confusion, and bring on the overthrow of the state; but rather in this, that through the injunctions of the civil law all may more easily conform to the prescriptions of the eternal law. . . . The binding force of the human laws is in this,

that they are to be regarded as applicants of the eternal law, and incapable of sanctioning anything which is not contained in the eternal law, as in the principle of all law . . . Where a law is enacted contrary to reason, or to the eternal law, or to some ordinance of God, obedience is unlawful, lest while obeying man we become disobedient to God.

The faculties of reason and will are not perfect. <sup>1</sup> Pope Leo notes that "it is possible, as is often seen, that the reason should propose something which is not really good, but which has the appearance of good, and that the will should choose accordingly." This is a most important distinction. Man can err, culpably or inculpably. When the reason errs, and leads the will with it into an erroneous choice, what it has chosen is simply a mirage, the appearance of a good. The choice of error is a proof of the existence of free will, but not a valid exercise of the faculty. It is a corruption or an abuse. Pope Leo writes:

The pursuit of what has a false appearance of good, though a proof of our freedom, just as a disease is a proof of our vitality, implies a defect in human liberty. . . . It abuses its freedom of choice and corrupts its very essence.

A man who chooses what is objectively evil is making himself not free but the slave of sin (Jn. 8:34). The ultimate consequence of a culpable choice of evil can be eternal damnation. Pope Leo warns:

The manner in which such dignity is exercised is of the greatest moment, inasmuch as on the use that is made of liberty the highest good and greatest evil alike depend. Man, indeed, is free to obey his reason, to seek moral good and to strive unswervingly after his last end. Yet he is free also to turn aside to all other things; and in pursuing the empty semblance of good, to disturb rightful order and fall headlong into the destruction which he has voluntarily chosen. Man is obliged to do all in his power to exercise the faculty of reason correctly, to exercise his judgment in accordance with right reason, bearing in mind that in moral and religious matters his decisions must affect his last end. Pope Leo explains:

The reason prescribes to the will what it should seek after or shun, in order to the eventual attainment of man's last end, for the sake of which all his actions ought to be performed. This ordination of *reason* is called law. In man's free will, therefore, or

in the moral necessity of our voluntary acts being in accordance with reason, lies the very root of the necessity of law.

When a man exercises his liberty in accordance with the law of God he renders his Creator homage which is due to Him in strict justice and also follows the only path by which he can be saved. He does not abdicate his dignity, he asserts it. When he chooses evil he abuses and profanes his most sacred possession. Psalm 118, the *Beati immaculati*, provides an inspired commentary on the correct exercise of human freedom:

Set before me for a law the way  
of Thy justifications, O Lord:  
And I will always seek after it.  
Give me understanding, and I  
will search Thy law:  
And I will keep it with my  
whole heart.

Needless to say, the unaided human reason could never ensure that salvation was assured. To maintain this position is to fall into the heresy of Pelagianism. It is with the aid of God's grace that the individual is enabled to exercise his freedom in accordance with the law of God and thus to attain salvation. The effects of Original Sin rule out the possibility of the unaided human reason leading men to salvation without the aid of grace. In his allocution [\*Singulari Quadam\*](#) (1854) Pope Pius IX warned that:

Such clients, or rather devotees, of human reason, who set it up as their unerring teaching and promise themselves every success under its guidance, have surely forgotten what a deep and severe wound was inflicted on human nature through the sin of our first parents; for darkness has clouded the mind and the will has been made prone to evil . . . Since it is certain that the light of reason has been dimmed and that the human race has fallen miserably from its former state of justice and innocence because of Original Sin, which is communicated to all the descendants of Adam, can anyone think that reason by itself is sufficient for the attainment of truth? If one is to avoid slipping and falling in the midst of such dangers and in the face of such weakness, dare he deny that Divine religion and heavenly grace are necessary

for salvation?

Pope Leo stresses the role of grace as the most important aid for the correct use of the reason and the will:

The first and most excellent of these is the power of His Divine *grace*, whereby the mind can be enlightened and the will wholesomely invigorated and moved to the constant pursuit of moral good, so that the use of our inborn liberty becomes at once less difficult and less dangerous.

In order to promote freedom of conscience in its correct sense, Pope Leo teaches that the state should *not* ensure that "everyone may, as he chooses, worship God nor not" but that every man in the state may follow the will of God and, from a consciousness of duty and free from every obstacle, obey His commands. This indeed, is true liberty, a liberty worthy of the sons of God, which nobly maintains the dignity of man, and is stronger than all violence or wrong-----a liberty which the Church has always maintained and held most dear.

Freedom of conscience is not, then, a natural right if it is taken as meaning that man has a right to choose error. But although an individual has no natural right to choose error he does possess a right not to be coerced into choosing truth in the internal forum of his private life. Pope Leo XIII taught in his encyclical [\*Immortale Dei\*](#):

The Church is wont to take earnest heed that no one shall be forced to embrace the Catholic faith against his will, for, as St. Augustine wisely reminds us, "Man cannot believe otherwise than of his own free will."

The application of this principle in practice is best shown by the tolerance and protection extended by the popes to the Jews. <sup>2</sup> It must be admitted frankly that during the history of the Church this principle has sometimes been violated, but where any attempt to force individuals to accept the Catholic faith has occurred it has been a violation of true Catholic teaching.

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But in a Catholic state the government has the right to *prevent* the propagation of heresy in public life. A distinction must be made between coercing a man into professing the truth, and preventing him from undermining the common good by spreading error in public and undermining the faith of the Catholic citizens. Thus in Catholic states such as Spain or Malta, before Vatican II, while sects such as Jehovah's Witnesses were left free to practice their religion in private, they were prevented by law from going from door to door in an attempt to persuade Catholics to abandon the true religion. Pope Leo explains:

Justice therefore forbids, and reason itself forbids, the state to be godless; or to adopt a line of action which would end in godlessness-----namely, to treat the various religions (as they call them) alike, and to bestow upon them promiscuously equal rights and privileges. Since, then, the profession of religion is necessary in the state, that religion must be professed which alone is true, and which can be recognized without difficulty, especially in Catholic states, because the marks of truth are, as it were, engraven upon it.

The consensus of papal teaching for the last three centuries is that a Catholic state has the right to restrict the external expression of heresy. But the popes also teach that a Catholic state is not obliged to invoke this right. The common good might often be harmed more by attempting to repress public heresy than by allowing it. Where the repression of public heresy would harm the common good by, for example, causing widespread civil unrest (which happened when Protestantism was suppressed in France), then toleration is the better policy. Pope Leo writes:

For this reason, while not conceding any right to anything save what is true and

honest, she (the Church) does not forbid public authority to tolerate what is at variance with truth and justice for the sake of avoiding some greater evil, or of obtaining or preserving some greater good.

According to Vatican II, everyone has the right to express his religious opinion in public as long as it does not cause a breach of public order. It seems impossible to reconcile this teaching with that of the popes from the preceding three hundred years, because what a human being professes as a *right* cannot be the object of *toleration*. The popes did not teach that what Jews and heretics believed, and the manner in which they worshipped in private, could be tolerated. They accepted that in the internal forum freedom from coercion is a *right*. But in the external forum, the public expression of heresy within a predominantly Catholic state could only be the object of toleration. It could not, therefore, be a right.

Pope Leo XIII himself sums up the teaching of his profound encyclical, *Libertas*:

And now to reduce for clearness' sake to its principal heads all that has been set forth with its immediate conclusions, the summing up is this briefly: that man, by a necessity of his nature, is wholly subject to the most faithful and ever-enduring power of God; and that as a consequence any liberty except that which consists in submission to God and in subjection to His will, is unintelligible. To deny the existence of this authority in God, or to refuse to submit to it, means to act not as a free man, but as one who treasonably abuses his liberty; and in such a disposition of mind the chief and deadly vice of liberalism *essentially* exists.

1. Wherever a choice is involved, the intellect or reason makes a judgment based on the information available to it, and the will then chooses whether or not to act upon this judgment. This is the case with any choice, whether or not a moral dimension is involved. Thus a veterinary surgeon could advise the owner of a dog that the animal was suffering from an illness which caused it considerable discomfort, and that the animal should be destroyed. The owner's judgment might well concur with that of the vet, but the choice made by his will might be to ignore the vet's advice, as he could not bear to be parted from his pet. In this case the will is failing to act properly upon a sound judgment of the reasoning faculty.

Often the will acts upon what it believes to be a correct judgment of the reason, but the intellect or reason leads the will into error, as it is based on incorrect, insufficient or erroneously interpreted information-----e.g., many sincere Protestants reject the Catholic Church because they honestly believe her teaching to be contrary to the Gospel.



In the first example the will was at fault; in the second the intellect or reason was responsible for leading the will into a wrong choice.

2. This point can be studied in the article on toleration in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*.